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Report reveals adoptive parents in Wales unable to access support for their children

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Last year 5,050 children in England and 345 children in Wales were adopted out of care. Until now, little was known about how many adoptions broke down (disrupted) or how many children's difficulties continued to make parenting extremely challenging. A new study, conducted by the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies at the University of Bristol, which looked at adoptions disruptions in

Wales, has revealed the extent to which adoptive parents are struggling to cope.

Over the last twelve years, thousands of children have been adopted out of care, the vast majority of whom had been abused and/or neglected by their birth families. Adoptive parenting requires parents who are willing to help children recover from early traumatic abusive experiences. However, there are a number of parents who face adoption disruptions, whereby a legally adopted child who is under the age of 18 leaves their adopted family home prematurely.

The report published today [3 June] (Beyond the Adoption Order in Wales) focuses on the experiences of ten adoptive parents living in Wales who had experienced an adoption disruption, and ten adoptive parents who were finding parenting very challenging. Findings in Wales were similar to those found in England. Children who were placed with adoptive parents over the age of four-years-old, and had come from a family background of domestic violence, neglect and sexual abuse were the most challenging to parent. Children who left their adoptive families (usually as teenagers) also had poor experiences in foster care.

Child to parent violence featured strongly in parental accounts of challenging behaviour. Parents gave many examples of being beaten, attacked, threatened and intimidated, with knives being used in some instances. Young people were mainly violent to their mothers, but fathers and siblings had also been assaulted. Parents were also trying to manage young people who were self-harming and/or running away.

In comparison with England, more parents in Wales complained about the high turnover of social workers, poorer services and the detrimental impact this had on support for their families. Parents spoke of their requests for help being ignored and being blamed for their child's difficulties. Many parents in this study thought that they were expected

to 'go it alone' and were made to feel ashamed that they had not been able to cope.

The latest report from the Hadley Centre builds on research undertaken in England in 2014 Beyond the Adoption Order: challenges, interventions and disruption. In that report, an analysis of national data on 37,335 adoptions over a 12-year period found that 3.2 per cent of children—around three in 100—moved out of their adoptive home prematurely. Most disruptions occurred during the teenage years. The report confirmed that the rate of breakdown was lower than anticipated, but it also revealed a stark picture of the problems faced by families. In-depth analyses of the circumstances of 70 families living in England showed that this low rate of disruption was down to the commitment and tenacity of parents who stuck by their children in extremely testing circumstances, often with little support from any services. Analysis of adoption disruption rates in Wales found a similarly low figure (read report here).

Professor Julie Selwyn, Director of the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies and the report's author said: "There is an urgent need for Children's Services to develop support services for adopted teenagers and their parents and for mental health services for young people to be improved. Although disruptions were rare, the impact of a disruption was enormous. The recently launched National Adoption Service (NAS), aims to transform the way in which adoption services are provided in Wales. Much has been made of the way in which the NAS intends to better serve prospective adopters, speed up the adoption process and leave fewer children drifting in care. However, similar levels of interest and investment are needed post placement. There is an urgent need for investment in support services.

"Our research has shown that adolescence is the period where families struggle and are most at risk of disruption. Yet services are sadly lacking.

Struggling adoptive families deserve timely, informed and compassionate support. The new NAS needs to: recognise the complex histories of the children who are placed for adoption, enable adoptive parents to be active participants in the process supported by skilled social workers, provide services that recognise the long-term impacts of abuse and neglect, and build an adoption service that is fit for the 21st Century."

The report, entitled 'Beyond the Adoption Order (Wales):discord and disruption", was carried out by the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies, based in the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol and funded by the Welsh Government. A public lecture on the findings from the Welsh and English studies can be viewed here.

Provided by University of Bristol

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